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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: BEN ALI'S DOWNHILL BATTLE FOR REELECTION

REF: A. TUNIS 677  
[1](#)B. TUNIS 643  
[1](#)C. TUNIS 569  
[1](#)D. TUNIS 557  
[1](#)E. TUNIS 388

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) As the October 25 elections approach, posters lauding President (and candidate) Ben Ali are becoming increasingly ubiquitous across Tunisia. Ben Ali's key election themes are security, stability, and economic prosperity. Ben Ali technically faces three opponents, and a fourth might still join the race. Two of the current "competitors" are obsequiously deferential to the President. A third candidate is a more feisty, if toothless, opponent. With the outcome of the presidential race known in advance, one opposition party representative acknowledged he was competing not with the President but with the other parties, in a bid to establish relevance. Elections for the lower house of parliament, also taking place on October 25, constitute a sideshow within a sideshow. Of 212 seats in the new legislature, 53 have been reserved for the opposition, and they will not take any more. While genuine competition has already been snuffed out of the process, the elections will provide an opportunity for the government's critics to highlight Tunisia's democracy deficit. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) President Ben Ali will handily win the October presidential elections. Even if the opposition parties were allowed to campaign freely, on a more balanced playing field, the likelihood that any could displace the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) is slim. The opposition parties are weak in membership, do not have compelling political platforms, and lack the funding and institutional capacity to mount serious challenges.

[1](#)3. (C) Nonetheless, political messages are in the air and they provide some insight into what the politicians think is relevant to the Tunisian people. The opposition parties are not legally allowed to campaign until the last two weeks before the election. The President has been campaigning for over a year but in the last few weeks his signature lavender colored banners have become ubiquitous on every available space.

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Ben Ali: "Choice of the Future" or "Artisan of Change"?  
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[1](#)4. (SBU) President Ben Ali formally presented his candidacy for President to the Consultative Council on August 26. Government controlled television stations provided extensive coverage of the "spontaneous" demonstrations of supporters purportedly ecstatic at the implementation of the President's

decision, first announced in July 2008, to run for another term of office. Campaign banners and posters hang from bridges and greet you along the roadside: "Ben Ali - the Choice of the Future;" and "Ben Ali - the Artisan of Change."

15. (SBU) The President has generally focused on three themes in his recent speeches: The progress, especially economic, that Tunisia has made since 1987 when he came to power; the need for all citizens to contribute to the support and betterment of the country; and the need for stability and security. On March 20, the anniversary of Tunisia's independence, Ben Ali criticized the press for emphasizing the nation's problems rather than its achievements. He said this was an "activity unbecoming of our society and not an expression of freedom or democracy," and warned against assailing national institutions.

16. (SBU) In his May 1 Labor Day speech, Ben Ali paid tribute to the country's work force, highlighted that since 1987, Tunisian workers have benefited from uninterrupted annual pay increases and announced his decision to increase the guaranteed minimum wage. He acknowledged that the financial crisis had had an adverse affect on Tunisia, said the government had taken preventive measures for those enterprises hit by the crisis, and reiterated that providing employment for the youth, especially university graduates, was a constant priority.

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An Endorsement Tsunami  
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17. (C) Ben Ali has been collecting endorsements like shovels of confetti at a hero's parade. Virtually every conceivable organization, governmental or non-governmental, has announced its support for the President from the major unions and business associations to the Tunisian Taekwondo federation. Typically, these formulaic endorsements thank the President for responding to the call of duty and the nation in submitting his candidacy. The endorsements usually laud the social and economic achievements the country has realized under Ben Ali and underline that this is all part of consolidating the democratic process in Tunisia. Tunisian diaspora organizations in Europe have sent in their messages of support lauding Tunisia's progress both domestically and internationally and promising to work to make these successes known and to counter the criticisms of the country's detractors and the efforts of "retrograde extremists."

18. (C) In a new wrinkle this year, two of Tunisia's leading newspapers, the Arabic "As Sabah" and French "Le Temps," both recently purchased by the President's son-in-law Sakhr el Materi, published obsequious front page endorsements. Organizations that refrain from such endorsements risk reprisals: the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists recently faced an internal high jacking by a pro-government faction (ref A). A member of the Young Lawyers Association's steering committee had his car windshield shattered by thugs soon after he voted against the committee's decision to endorse Ben Ali.

19. (C) Even some elements of the opposition get in on the act. In recent remarks, Social Democratic Movement (MDS) leader Ismael Boulehya publicly praised the "open" election climate. He cited Tunisia's economic and social progress under Ben Ali and stressed Ben Ali's role in building solidarity among the classes and his care for the younger generations.

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The "Loyal" (Emasculated) Opposition  
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110. (C) Two of the three parties currently fielding presidential candidates are commonly referred to as the "loyal opposition." Their nominal opposition to the ruling RCD is tempered by their frequent and fawning praise and pledges of loyalty to President Ben Ali.

¶11. (C) Mohamed Bouchiha, candidate for the Popular Unity Party (PUP), a leftist/socialist party, ran in 1999 and 2004 and won 3.78 percent of the votes, the highest amount of any opposition party. He has been Secretary General of the PUP since 2000. Originally a journalist, in the 1990s he was appointed Chief Executive Officer of the state-owned oil pipeline and transportation company. His wife, Ariba Ben Ammar, is a cousin of the First Lady Laila Ben Ali (Trabelsi). Following a common pattern in Tunisia, she joined (infiltrated) the Tunisian Human Rights League in the 1990s and in 2000 engineered an internal rebellion by pro-government members who filed suit against the group's leadership.

¶12. (C) In a recent public party meeting, Bouchiha lauded the coming elections as "a major step in strengthening the pluralist process." Bouchiha said he was running to show the PUP's strength and popularity and its contribution to public affairs and to give people an opportunity to use their right to choose between programs and concepts. He said he was not competing with Ben Ali but with the other parties. He also stressed the positive political climate for the elections, pointing to the "constructive relationship" between the government and the parties.

¶13. (C) The other "loyal opposition" candidate is Ahmed Inoubli of the United Democratic Union (UDU), a small party with pan-Arabist/socialist tendencies. Inoubli, a lawyer and member of the University of Tunis Law School faculty, has served as Secretary General of the UDU since 2003 following the arrest of the former UDU leader. The party endorsed President Ben Ali in the 2004 elections. Earlier this year, Inoubli endorsed Ben Ali for reelection, but subsequently announced his own candidacy. A journalist contact of the Embassy told us Inoubli's change of heart came at Ben Ali's request. In his statement announcing his candidacy, Inoubli reaffirmed the party's commitment to the country's republican system, democratic values, and its opposition to regressive influences (GOT-speak for Islamist influences coming from outside Tunisia).

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Ex-Communist Candidate a More Strident Regime Critic  
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¶14. (C) Ahmed Brahim, Secretary General of the Tajdid ("renewal") Party (formerly Tunisia's communist party) is the only critic of the regime currently enrolled as a candidate. When Tajdid ran in the 2004 elections, it officially took 0.95 percent of the votes. Brahim advocates a modern democratic secular state and is opposed to political Islam. Brahim and other Tajdid leaders have been outspoken in criticizing the government and its intimidation tactics. The party's website, which is not blocked, carries Brahim's press conferences where he has listed the tactics used against the party. He protested when the edition of the party's newspaper which announced his candidacy was seized in March ¶2009. Brahim has complained subsequently that the GOT has thwarted media coverage of his party's activities, and that hotels had been prevented from renting space to his party for events.

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A Potential Fourth Opponent  
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¶15. (C) Mustafa Ben Jaffar, of the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL) ran against Ben Ali in 2004, and had been planning another challenge this year. However, changes to the law in 2008 may disqualify him from running this year. He is reportedly awaiting a legal opinion before filing his paperwork for candidacy. If approved, he would become the second candidate with a history of strident criticism of the regime.

¶16. (C) As reported in refs B and C, another prominent regime critic, Najib Chebbi of the Progressive Democratic Party

(PDP), announced last month, after several months of unofficial campaigning that neither he nor anyone in his party would participate in the Government's presidential elections "charade." The PDP will nonetheless compete for seats in parliament. In 2004, the party did not contest either the presidency or the parliament.

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Youth: Reaching Out to an Alienated Demographic  
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¶17. (U) The opposition parties are reaching out to the newly enfranchised youth 18 to 20 years old. Et-Tajdid held an August seminar for young voters in Monastir on political opposition and election monitoring. The Green Party is also looking for ways to get young people to turn out on election day. Likewise, the UDU has a youth committee that is trying to get young people to register for their voting cards. The ruling RCD already has a very active committee to deal with youth issues. All have their work cut out for them, as Tunisia's youth already seem a generally cynical and alienated generation. For example, a 2007 survey of about 1,000 young men and women between 15-25 years old by the Ministry of Youth revealed that 72 percent did not plan to participate in politics or join a party, and only 9 percent regularly followed the news on local media.

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Parliamentary Elections: A Sideshow within a Sideshow  
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¶18. (C) Voters will also elect a new Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of parliament, on October 25. The number of seats in the Chamber will expand this year from 189 to 212, with 53 seats reserved for the opposition (currently five opposition parties are represented in parliament). The ruling RCD's lock on the remaining 159 seats in the coming parliament is a virtual certainty. All parties will submit their candidate slates, which have to be approved by the Constitutional Council, the electoral oversight body whose members are appointed by President Ben Ali. Opposition parties anticipate significant government harassment, as in 2004, in the form of legal challenges to the qualifications of members of their slates. If one candidate is ruled ineligible, the entire slate is disqualified and the parties have to start from scratch.

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Comment  
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¶19. (C) The GOT appears to have already been successful in eradicating the element of competition from the 2009 elections. However, the elections will provide an occasion for the Government's critics, inside the country and abroad, to attract international attention to Tunisia's democracy deficit. End comment.

GRAY